

THE DURHAM CHRONICLE

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THE STRANGE RIDE OF MORROWBIE JUKES.

BY RUDYARD KIPLING.

Alive or dead—there is no other way.—Native Proverb. ... of the Sutej My fever had altogether left me, and with the exception of a slight dizziness in the head, I felt no bad effects from the fall overnight.

There is, as the conjurers say, no deception about this tale. Jukes by accident stumbled upon a village that is well known to exist, though he is the only Englishman who has been there. A somewhat similar institution used to flourish on the outskirts of Calcutta, and there is a story that if you go into the heart of Bikanir, which is in the heart of the great Indian desert, you shall come across not a village, but a town, where the dead who did not die but may not live have established their headquarters.

Imagine, then, as I have said before, a horseshoe shaped crater of sand with steeply graded sand walls about 35 feet high. The slope, I fancy, must have been about 65 degrees. This crater inclosed a level piece of ground about 50 yards long by 30 at its broadest part, with a rude well in the center.

Having remounted Pornic, who was as anxious as I to get back to camp, I rode round the base of the horseshoe to find some place whence an exit would be practicable. The inhabitants, whoever they might be, had not thought fit to put in an appearance, so I was left to my own devices.

On the 23d December, 1884, I felt a little feverish. There was a full moon at the time, and in consequence every dog near my tent was baying it. The brutes assembled in twos and threes and drove me frantic. A few days previously I had shot one loud mouthed singer and suspended his carcass in terror about 50 yards from my tent door.

The light headedness which accompanies fever acts differently on different men. My irritation gave way after a short time to a fixed determination to slaughter one huge black and white beast who had been foremost in song and first in flight throughout the evening.

I therefore ordered my groom to saddle Pornic and bring him round quietly to the rear of my tent. When the pony was ready, I stood at his head prepared to mount and dash out as soon as the dog should again lift up his voice.

Another bullet reminded me that I had better save my breath to cool my porridge, and I retreated hastily up the sands and back to the horseshoe, where I saw that the noise of the rifle had drawn 65 human beings from the badger holes which I had up till that point supposed to be untenanted.

The delirium of fever and the excitement of rapid motion through the air must have taken away the remnant of my senses. I have a faint recollection of standing upright in my stirrups and of brandishing my hog spear at the great white moon that looked down so calmly on my mad gallop and of shouting challenges to the camel thorn bushes as they whizzed past.

The wretched beast went forward like a thing possessed over what seemed to be a limitless expanse of moonlit sand. Next, I remember, the ground rose suddenly in front of us, and as we topped the ascent I saw the waters of the Sutej shining like a silver bar below. Then Pornic blundered heavily on his nose, and we rolled together down some unseen slope.

I must have lost consciousness, for when I recovered I was lying on my stomach in a heap of soft white sand, and the dawn was beginning to break faintly over the edge of the slope down which I had fallen. As the light grew stronger I saw that I was at the bottom of a horseshoe shaped crater of sand.

knees, imploring me in all sorts of uncouth tongues to spare them.

In the tumult and just when I was feeling very much ashamed of myself for having thus easily given way to my temper a thin, high voice murmured in English from behind my shoulder.

Gunga Dass (I have, of course, no hesitation in mentioning the man's real name) I had known four years before as a Decanee Brahman lent by the Punjab government to one of the Khalsa states. He was in charge of a branch telegraph office there, and when I had last met him was a jovial, full stomached, portly government servant, with a marvelous capacity for making bad puns in English, a peculiarity which made me remember him long after I had forgotten his services to me in his official capacity.

Now, however, the man was changed beyond all recognition. Caste mark, stomach, slate colored continuations and uncouth speech were all gone. I looked at a withered skeleton, turbanless and almost naked, with long, matted hair and deep set, codfish eyes.

The crowd retreated to some distance as I turned toward the miserable figure and ordered him to show me some method of escaping from the crater. He held a freshly plucked crow in his hand and in reply to my question commenced lighting a fire there in silence.

"There are only two kinds of men, the alive and the dead. When you are dead, you are dead, but when you are alive, you live." Here the crowd demanded his attention for an instant as it twirled before the fire in danger of being burned to a cinder.

The nature of the reeking village was made plain now, and all that I had known or read of the grotesque and the horrible paled before the fact just communicated by the ex-Brahman.

Gunga Dass, as he bent over the unclean beld, watched me curiously. Hindoos seldom laugh, and his surroundings were not such as to move Gunga Dass to any undue excess of hilarity. He removed the crow solemnly from the wooden spit and as solemnly devoured it. Then he continued his story, which I give in his own words.

"In epidemics of the cholera you are carried to be burned almost before you are dead. When you come to the river side, the cold air perhaps makes you alive, and then, if you are only little alive, mud is put on your nose and mouth and you die conclusively.

"There is no way of getting out?" "None of what kind at all. When I first came, I made experiments frequently, and all the others also, but we have always succumbed to the sand which is precipitated upon our heads."

"But surely," I broke in at this point, "the river front is open, and it is worth while dodging the bullets, while at night." I had already matured a rough plan of escape which a natural instinct of selfishness forbade me sharing with Gunga Dass.

"You will not"—he had dropped the ear completely after his opening sentence—"make any escape that way. But you can try. I have tried. Once

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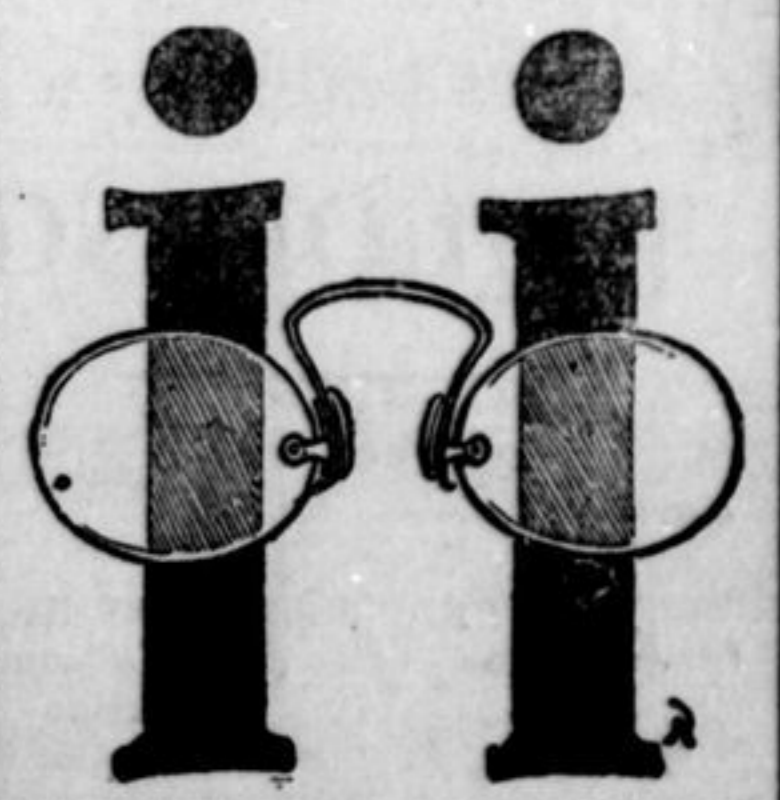
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